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**Forced displacement, onward migration, and reformulations of ‘home’ by  
Chagossians in Crawley, West Sussex**

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**Abstract**

This article compares forced displacement and onward migration within the living memory of one community. The Chagos islanders were forcibly uprooted from the Chagos Archipelago in the Indian Ocean to Mauritius and Seychelles between 1965 and 1973, and have begun to migrate onwards to the UK after being awarded UK citizenship in 2002. Comparing Chagossian accounts of arrival in Mauritius with recent experiences in Crawley (West Sussex), the article explores how different experiences of movement affect migrants’ reformulations of home, homeland, and return. Onward migration to the UK has challenged Chagossians’ preconceptions of Britons and Britain, subtly altered their assessments of Mauritians and Mauritius, and adapted the general focus of their visions of the future from a choice between Mauritius and Chagos to a choice between Mauritius and the UK. Thus the article reveals ethnographically how migrants’ perspectives on the past and the future alike are relative to their positioning in the present.

**Biographical note**

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**Keywords**

Chagos islanders in Mauritius and UK; displacement and migration; home and homeland

### **Chagossian uprootings and relocations**

This article brings together debates about the distinction between relatively forced and relatively voluntary human migration (cf. Jansen and Löfving 2007; Richmond 1994; Turton 2003; Van Hear 1998) and discussions of (forced) migrants' changing conceptions of 'home' and 'homeland' in exile (Ballinger 2003; Jansen 2007; Jing 1996; Malkki 1995; Peteet 2005; Zetter 1999). Within living memory, Chagos islanders were forcibly displaced from the Chagos Archipelago in the Indian Ocean to Mauritius and Seychelles. More recently, Chagossians and their direct descendants started migrating onwards to the UK after being awarded UK citizenship. How have these different experiences of migration and relocation affected Chagossians' reformulations of their various places of birth, upbringing, and residence, their conceptualisations of home and homeland, and their plans for the future and for 'return'?

From the late eighteenth century onwards, the Chagos Archipelago was administered by the French and later the British as a dependency of colonial Mauritius. The islands were originally populated with slaves from coastal East Africa and Madagascar via Mauritius. By the mid-twentieth century Chagos had a population of about two thousand, most working in the coconut plantations, producing copra and coconut oil for export. In 1965, following independence negotiations with Mauritian politicians, the UK government excised Chagos from colonial Mauritius to form part of the new British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT). In 1966, the UK government agreed to make the largest Chagos island, Diego Garcia, available for US defence purposes. At the request of the US government, the UK government depopulated the entire archipelago by 1973, first by restricting the importation of supplies and preventing the return of islanders who had gone to Mauritius or Seychelles, and later by forcibly removing the remaining islanders and sending them to Mauritius and Seychelles.

Chagossian organisations in Mauritius and Seychelles hold registration records for around one thousand surviving islanders plus around 4,500 of their second-generation offspring.<sup>1</sup>

Distinguishing between types of migration – contemporary versus historical and forced versus voluntary – is of great significance to the Chagossian struggles in exile for adequate compensation and the right to return to Chagos. Immigration is central to the history of the Small Island States of the Indian Ocean,<sup>2</sup> most of which were uninhabited prior to European colonial expansion in the region from the sixteenth century onwards.<sup>3</sup> The ancestors of today's Mauritians were French and British administrators and plantation owners, East African and Malagasy slaves, and Indian and Chinese indentured labourers. The Chagossian case has two unique features: firstly, Chagossians themselves (rather than only their ancestors) have experienced forced displacement first-hand; secondly, the entire population of the Chagos Archipelago was uprooted (rather than only certain proportions of sending communities, as was the case with slavery and indenture under colonialism).

Emphasising their victimisation and forced displacement, successive Chagossian groups in Mauritius have campaigned for compensation and the right to return to Chagos. Chagos islanders won limited financial compensation from the UK government in 1978 and 1982, but in 2003 they lost a legal claim for further compensation (see Jeffery 2006). A judicial review in the name of the Chagos Refugees Group leader, Olivier Bancoult, concluded in 2000 that the depopulation of Chagos had been unlawful since it was contrary to the laws of the territory. In response, the UK government used the royal prerogative to impose a new immigration ordinance in 2004 preventing Chagossians from entering the territory. Olivier Bancoult's legal team won a judicial review of this latter legislation in 2006, and the UK government appealed unsuccessfully in the Court of Appeal in 2007, but won its final appeal in the House of Lords in 2008. The Chagos Refugees Group remains committed to

seeking the right to resettle Chagos, and its legal team is now preparing to pursue a case in the European Court of Human Rights.

In 2008 the Chagos Refugees Group in Mauritius and the UK Chagos Support Association launched a campaign entitled *Let Them Return*, producing a feasibility study for the resettlement of the Chagos Archipelago (Howell 2008). Ideas about resettlement amongst Chagos islanders and their descendants, however, are partially delineated by generation and affected by the passage of time in exile. The UK government granted a three-day visit to Diego Garcia, Peros Banhos and Salomon for one hundred native Chagos islanders in 2006, but the vast majority of Chagossians have had no opportunity to visit Chagos in the decades since the displacement, and an ever increasing proportion of the community consists of those born in exile, who have never been to Chagos.

Meanwhile, under the British Overseas Territories Act 2002, the UK government awarded UK citizenship to displaced Chagos islanders and their second-generation offspring born in exile.<sup>4</sup> Chagossian organisations in the UK estimate that up to one thousand people have migrated from Mauritius and Seychelles to the UK. Chagossians view the onward migration in tandem with the original displacement – they tend to consider onward migration to the UK less as voluntary migration than a potentially positive outcome of their previous forced displacement – and they compare the UK not only with Mauritius but also with Chagos. Thus, their history of successive uprootings and relocations differentiates Chagossians from (most) other recent migrant populations in the UK.<sup>5</sup>

In the following two sections, I introduce Mauritius and Crawley and outline the position of the Chagossians within each.<sup>6</sup> I then compare Chagossian accounts of their lives in Chagos, Mauritius and the UK to show how onward migration to the UK has challenged Chagossians' preconceptions of Britons and Britain, subtly altered their assessments of Mauritians and Mauritius, and changed the focus of their visions of the future. Particularly for

the generations born and brought up in Mauritius, Chagos increasingly features as the ancestral homeland rather than a viable future, and Mauritius has somewhat unexpectedly been reconfigured as a homeland with certain benefits and drawbacks relative to the UK. I ask if this has negative implications for the Chagossian struggle which focuses on the right to return to Chagos, and conclude that this not necessarily so, since resettlement feasibility studies are premised on the understanding that the Chagos Archipelago could support only a very small proportion of the Chagossian community (see Howell 2008).

### **Chagossians in Mauritius**

Mauritius has a complex colonial history of immigration from Africa, Asia, and Europe. Approximately two-thirds of the population are of Indian descent (52 percent and 14 percent of the total population are Hindu and Muslim respectively), 29 percent are of mostly African or mixed descent (known as Creoles or Afro-Mauritians), three percent are of Chinese descent, and two percent of French descent.<sup>7</sup> An ethnic division of labour has persisted across generations: Franco-Mauritians still own most of the large sugarcane plantations and factories, Sino-Mauritians are over-represented in small business, Hindu Mauritians are over-represented in politics, Indo-Mauritians are over-represented in agriculture, and disproportionately high numbers of Afro-Mauritians are non-agricultural manual labourers such as factory workers, dockworkers, and fishermen (Eriksen 1998: 64, 110, 118; Mauritius Research Council 1999: 30; Simmons 1982: 10-11). Afro-Mauritians are widely recognised to be at the bottom of the ethnic hierarchy in Mauritius.

The demographic, socio-political, and economic situation in Mauritius during the decades either side of independence in 1968 impacted negatively upon the Chagossians' arrival in Mauritius in the 1960s and early 1970s. Firstly, Mauritius was already experiencing high population growth and severe shortage of housing stock as a result of highly destructive cyclones (Bowman 1991: 112-113). No resettlement programmes were implemented for

Chagossians, and most had to find their own accommodation. Some islanders who staged a protest were given dilapidated flats without running water or glass in the windows, and which had recently been vacated by wild animals. The vast majority settled in disadvantaged neighbourhoods on the outskirts of the capital Port Louis. Secondly, Mauritius was already suffering from high unemployment and over-dependence on the sugar industry (Bowman 1991: 112-113). Chagossians had difficulties finding jobs, especially because their experience was limited to the coconut plantations in Chagos, and they had limited contacts in Mauritius. Thirdly, Chagossians are mostly of African descent, and (like other Afro-Mauritians), many characterise their experiences in education and employment in Mauritius in terms of racism and discrimination, particularly (but by no means exclusively) by majority Hindu Mauritians (see also Boswell 2006; Eriksen 1998: 62-67; Mauritius Research Council 1999: 10, 60). A retired Chagossian woman, Josie,<sup>8</sup> summarised the problems Chagossians faced as follows:

It was difficult when we came here to look for work. Why? [Mauritians said:] ‘The *Ilois* [islanders] don’t know how to read. Don’t pay attention to them. They’re savages.’ That’s not easy. When we came to Mauritius we came to a foreign country. How to adapt? We’re humans too, so instead of treating us in that way, they could have welcomed us, but instead they were mostly bad... They said ‘the *Ilois* have left their islands and come to take all the work here’. For getting work it was the same: when they knew that you are *Ilois* it was difficult, and they wouldn’t give you work except as a housemaid. So many people were mistreated. Dogs are treated better in Mauritius than we are.

Chagossians in Mauritius won compensation packages in 1978 and 1982 only after almost a decade of sustained organised struggle, but the sums they received were often insufficient to clear debts they had incurred in the interim, let alone enable them to start afresh in Mauritius. By and large, the Chagossian community has remained marginalised in Mauritius, suffering disproportionately from poor housing and education, and high rates of unemployment and under-employment, poor mental and physical health, substance abuse, gambling, prostitution, and crime (Anyangwe 2001; Botte 1980: chapter 9; Dræbel 1997;

Madeley 1985: 3, 10-11; Prosser 1976: 6; Sylva 1981; Vine, Sokolowski, and Harvey 2005; Walker 1986: chapter 3).

### **Chagossian migration to Crawley**

Unsurprisingly, hundreds of Chagos islanders and their second-generation offspring applied for UK passports after being awarded full UK citizenship in 2002. Their reasons for wanting to emigrate from Mauritius fell into three main categories: what they see as a poor quality and unfair education system; high unemployment (hovering around the ten percent mark nationally) and unattractive employment opportunities (especially for those structurally disadvantaged by poor education and ethnic or racial discrimination); and the chasm between low wages and high living costs.<sup>9</sup> They imagined *la vie en rose* in the UK, anticipating that their families would benefit from a better and fairer education system, more available and accessible jobs, and lower disparity between wages and the cost of living. They sought to escape long-term disadvantage in Mauritius and hoped to build a more productive and equitable future for their families in the UK.

When the first groups of Chagossians landed at Gatwick, they staged protests in the airport until West Sussex County Council agreed to settle them in nearby Crawley, offering newcomers six months of hotel accommodation plus maintenance to help them to establish themselves. Subsequent Chagossian migration from Mauritius has been chain migration to Crawley and nearby commuter towns.<sup>10</sup> Crawley was one of the New Towns designed after the Second World War to disperse people and jobs from London (Cole 2004; Gwynne 1990). According to the 2001 census, Crawley's ethnic minority population (i.e. all groups other than white, white other, and white Irish) was 10.3 percent, which is the highest in West Sussex, where the county average is 2.9 percent, compared to a South East average of 4.4 percent, and an England average of 7.9 percent (Crawley Together 2001: chapter 2; Southdown Housing Association 2006: 9-10). Crawley's so-called Black and Minority Ethnic (BME) residents are



predominantly of South Asian origin, with those of Indian origin comprising 4.4 percent and those of Pakistani origin comprising 3 percent of the town's total population respectively (Southdown Housing Association 2006: 9). Crawley has a long history of in-migration from South Asia, China, Uganda, West Africa, and the Caribbean, and from Afghanistan since the war in 2001, from Mauritius and Seychelles since the awarding of UK citizenship to Chagossians in 2002, and from Eastern Europe since the expansion of the European Union in 2004 and 2007.<sup>11</sup> The 2001 census reported that Crawley had a population of 100,000. Considering the rate of immigration from Mauritius and Seychelles since 2002, and assuming that Chagossian residents continue to bring their families to Crawley, the Chagossian community may soon comprise one percent of the town's population.

Local jobs are predominantly low-skilled and low-waged, but unemployment rates are consistently very low compared to national averages, sometimes representing the lowest rates in the UK, and on occasion falling to nearly zero percent (Crawley Together 2001: chapter 3; Gwynne 1990: 167, 171). Over half of working Chagossians in Crawley are employed at Gatwick airport, where the vast majority work for industrial cleaning companies, aeroplane food production companies, or fast-food and other commercial outlets in the terminal buildings. Most other working Chagossians are based in and around Crawley town, where they work as cashiers or shelf stackers in supermarkets or department stores, warehouse assistants in the nearby Manor Royal industrial estate, cleaners, carers or childminders in homes, hairdressers in local Afro hair salons, security guards, freelance dressmakers, or painter-decorators. Unskilled commercial cleaning and industrial labouring jobs pay around or just above the national minimum wage, putting Chagossians in the lowest ten percent of earners nationally.<sup>12</sup> Most Chagossians were cleaners, fishermen, dock labourers or factory helpers in Mauritius, and tend to consider their new jobs to be equivalent to the unskilled

manual jobs they held in Mauritius.<sup>13</sup> On the whole, they say they work harder but are paid better than in Mauritius, and this enables them to achieve a higher standard of living.

### **Chagos, Mauritius, and Crawley compared**

Just as displaced Chagossians in Mauritius frequently compared Mauritius with Chagos, so Chagossian migrants in Crawley frequently compared Crawley with Mauritius. These multifaceted comparisons centred on evocations of solidarity in Chagos versus individualism in Mauritius, racism versus acceptance in Crawley, the effects of chain migration to Crawley on relations amongst Chagossians, a sense of community in Mauritius versus isolation in Crawley for elderly people, and changing visions of the future. These comparisons reveal how onward migration has transformed Chagossians' preconceptions of Britons and Britain and brought about a subtle reformulation of Chagossians' conceptions of Mauritians and Mauritius, with implications for their ideas about home and homeland, relocation and resettlement, and the future.

### **Solidarity in Chagos versus individualism in Mauritius**

Nostalgic recollections of the homeland among forcibly displaced people have been documented in diverse geographical and historical contexts (Ballinger 2003; Jing 1996; Malkki 1995; Sayigh 1979). Representations of the Chagos Archipelago became increasingly standardised and romanticised in exile: political, economic, sexual, and racial inequalities and conflict were routinely downplayed in public recollections of Chagos, and emerged only in private discussions with individuals (see Jeffery 2007). Older native islanders uniformly emphasised that community life on Chagos was based on solidarity and sharing between families. Many islanders said that each household grew vegetable crops and raised animals for consumption, that neighbours frequently requested foodstuffs from one another, and that there was no formal requirement to reciprocate. Moreover, in the case of death, neighbours would collectively raise funds to purchase provisions for the wake to relieve bereaved families of

this responsibility, and any celebrations scheduled during the mourning period would be postponed.

Chagossians in Mauritius often suggested that such solidarity and commitment to sharing had become increasingly difficult to sustain in exile. Geographical dispersal had resulted in the dilution of Chagossian traditions within diverse Mauritian neighbourhoods. Furthermore, poverty meant that Chagossian families had to consider their own financial interests rather than sharing freely. Chagossian families reported that when they were bereaved in Mauritius they faced complicated organisational responsibilities and large financial expenditures alone, and several complained that their Mauritian neighbours continued insensitively to socialise normally and cause disturbances during the mourning period.<sup>14</sup> A retired Chagossian man depicts the stark contrast as follows:

I remember that everywhere [on Chagos] there was harmony. If somebody had a particular problem, then the neighbours would help, even if that person was not a relative... After the removal it was different. If there was a death [on Diego Garcia] then the whole of the population would mourn and would support the family. But in Mauritius the neighbour would say not to worry and would play music as usual.  
(Quoted in Chamberlain 2006: 17)

This standardised account of solidarity in Chagos and individualism in Mauritius is echoed in the contrast drawn by older Chagossians between the traditional solidarity within the ‘Chagossian community’ and the individualism they attributed to their descendants. Older Chagos islanders in Mauritius frequently claimed that responsibility to the community had been replaced with individuals acting in their own best interests. Their main charge was that UK citizenship resulted from sustained campaigns led by the older generations, and yet the younger generations – who are eligible only as the second-generation offspring of displaced islanders – emigrate with their own children without considering the needs of their elders left behind in Mauritius.

Racism versus acceptance in Crawley

Official estimates suggest that the provision of six months of hotel accommodation and maintenance for early groups of Chagossians from Mauritius and paying legal fees relating to claims had cost West Sussex County Council £870,000 by May 2007.<sup>15</sup> From the perspective of local taxpayers, sympathy with the Chagossians' plight is in contention with concerns about potentially having to pay for incomers who may (at least initially) rely on local resources. Many Chagossians are worried about losing the sympathy of other residents. Countless adults said they were embarrassed to travel by bus at the same time as groups of schoolchildren from Mauritius who throw food and swear in Mauritian Kreol, assuming that their fellow travellers could not understand (a risky assumption in a language based on French, and in a town where there are growing numbers of migrants from Mauritius and Seychelles). More seriously, Chagossians worry about rising levels of theft and violent attacks associated with the Chagossian community in Crawley, visible social problems such as the Chagossian men who gather on the streets to use drugs or alcohol, and a one-dimensional image of the Chagossians as a community taking benefits but not repaying via taxes.

Compared to their almost uniformly negative reports of their reception by Mauritians on arrival in Mauritius, however, Chagossians report a wide range of receptions in Crawley, from racism and lack of interest to friendly neighbours and offers of support. Serge, a Chagossian man in his mid-forties, worked in the Port Louis docks before bringing his family to Crawley and working as a cleaner at Gatwick. He was positive about the treatment he has received, in comparison with his mistreatment in Mauritius.

LJ: Have you encountered racism here?

Serge: Since I've come here I haven't observed any racist situation. Everyone has welcomed me. On the contrary, it's here that we learned to respect people. For example, when I'm waiting for the bus, if there's someone behind me, then that person will let me get on the bus before they do. This is a civilised way of doing things. We weren't treated like that in Mauritius because of our black skin.

LJ: Are people here badly behaved?

Serge: Badly behaved? You get that everywhere, particularly rude young people. I don't worry about that. I haven't had any problems with people at all yet. In Mauritius

we were mistreated: people said we were islanders who didn't even know how to wear shoes. By contrast, we don't get that here.

LJ: Have British people helped you?

Serge: My neighbours ... are very kind, they helped us get schools, helped us run errands that we had to do. They are still helping us, for example when we need a lift somewhere they never refuse us.

Thus he dismissed youthful anti-social behaviour as a universal problem and focused instead on the contrast between racist and discriminatory mistreatment in Mauritius and the respectful and friendly welcome he received in Crawley in general and in his neighbourhood in particular.

For others, preconceptions of a wide gulf between Mauritius and the UK were challenged when high expectations of life in the UK were dashed by unexpected hardships. This was revealed particularly clearly in my discussion with two unemployed men of Chagossian parentage. Bruno is in his early forties and had left his wife and children behind in Mauritius; his friend Nathaniel is a single man in his mid-twenties. I asked them to compare their prior expectations with their actual experiences of the UK.

LJ: When I gave English classes in Mauritius, people assumed *la vie en rose* in the UK, and didn't believe me when I said that there is racism and poverty in the UK.

Bruno: Do you know why people didn't want to believe you? Because people say that Mauritius is paradise but it's not, it's hell – racism, corruption, important people [*gran-dimunn*] remain important, insignificant people [*ti-dimunn*] remain insignificant – but they think it's not like that here [in the UK], that everyone's equal. They see big limousines in films and they hear that everyone in the UK has a house and a car, and they think our life is good, but even though I have a car, I find that life is difficult. I was never depressed until I came to the UK. It's not the weather that depresses me, it's because this is a terrible country, and now I think it would have been better to stay in Mauritius.

Nathaniel: I got depressed here too.

Bruno: The Chagossian community is a lost people [*enn lepep perdi*]. Poverty [*lamizer*] has made them come [to the UK]. I've seen lots of people who are living like animals [*bebet*] but they don't even know it. They say 'I have my house, my car, my life is OK', but they will be slaves for white people for their whole lives.

Nathaniel: There's lots of racism here, dogs get better treatment than Chagossians here because of our black skin. You'd have to say that we aren't living here, we're surviving [*nu pa pe viv isi, nu pe surviv*].

Most striking about this conversation was that the phrases Bruno and Nathaniel used to describe Chagossians' problems in Britain – particularly Bruno's evocation of the Chagossian

community as a lost people working like slaves for the benefit of others and Nathaniel's assertion that dogs are treated better than Chagossians due to racism – were exactly the same as those I had heard many times from Chagossians describing their problems in Mauritius (including Josie, quoted above).<sup>16</sup> The identity of the archetypal racist ethnic Other has been transferred from Indo-Mauritians in Mauritius to white people in the UK. Both men were immensely disappointed because they had migrated to escape discrimination and hardship, and expected UK to offer an opportunity to improve their situations, but found instead that they encountered similar problems of racism and discrimination in the UK. My point is not that they decided that Mauritius was not as bad as they had previously thought, but rather to highlight their sense of disappointment that the UK was not an improvement.

Others identified an unexpected parallel between Crawley and Mauritius in the local dominance of people of South Asian descent. Due to the strong presence of South Asians in Crawley, the Right to Buy council houses scheme, the popularity of Buy to Let mortgage schemes, and the tendency for successive groups of migrants to settle in the same neighbourhoods, many Chagossians in Crawley have South Asian landlords, co-workers, managers, and employers. Luke, a Mauritian man whose wife Lydia is of Chagossian parentage, remarked that:

Chagossians want to leave Mauritius because Creoles are disadvantaged and discriminated against by Hindus and Muslims, but they come here and find that Hindus and Muslims are ahead here too, because a long time ago they were the first to be given the chance to come here and work, and by their intelligence they've succeeded.

Ironically, he implies, history is repeating itself for Chagossians and their families, who have finally obtained the opportunity of a fresh start in the UK, but still find themselves educationally, professionally, and financially left behind by British South Asians and others who (unlike Chagossians) came to the UK decades ago.<sup>17</sup>

Exposure to British people and to other migrants has also affected attitudes towards Mauritian people. Over a series of conversations, Luke told me:

I've learned a lot here. In Mauritius I thought that the Mauritian mentality [*mantalite Morisyen*] was bad, but now I know that people everywhere are bad... British people don't know anything: the Government offers them lots but they don't benefit. I know that I don't want to stay here because of this mentality. Asians and Africans have a slave mentality and they know that they've got to save [money], but the British people don't benefit.

It's obvious that British people are less intelligent than people from India and other countries... The only reason the UK is strong is because the pound is strong, otherwise it would not have power over the rest of the world, and if Mauritians had the facilities that British people have, Mauritius would become much stronger than the UK.

Thus his previously held conception of a uniquely bad 'Mauritian mentality' is no longer plausible to him since he has identified equivalent or greater deficiencies amongst many of the people he has met since moving to the UK. Onward migration to the UK has thus challenged often rose-tinted preconceptions about life in the UK, and at the same time precipitated a subtle rethinking of previously held negative conceptualisations of Mauritians and life in Mauritius.

#### Chain migration and relations amongst Chagossians

Stereotypes of Mauritian, Creole, or Chagossian 'mentality' also play a significant role in internal critiques of the 'Chagossian community' in Crawley. After the early arrivals settled in Crawley, many subsequent migrants chose Crawley because they already had family there. On arrival, they liked being able to meet up with friends in the town and therefore being less likely to suffer isolation or loneliness. Chain migration to Crawley, however, has resulted in a number of criticisms of the community from within. Earlier migrants commonly complain that their later-arriving relatives abused their hospitality by staying with them too long, not contributing enough financially or in terms of housework or other household tasks, or conducting illicit relationships in their homes.

One outcome of the chain migration to Crawley is that there are ‘too many Chagossian families in Crawley’ [*tro buku fami Chagossien dan Crawley*] and consequently ‘too much gossip’ [*tro buku palab*]. Many migrants were concerned that news about their social activities – such as drinking, nightclubbing, and dating – could travel back to Mauritius or Seychelles via the Chagossian grapevine to reach the ears of family members (particularly their parents). They dreaded their relatives in Mauritius or Seychelles seeking to exert influence over their religious, sexual, or financial behaviour: for example, by reminding them that they still had a partner and family back in Mauritius or Seychelles, or that they still owed money to family members who financed their passage to the UK. One story I heard had got back to Mauritius was about young women of Chagossian parentage in the UK wearing knee-high boots and working as barmaids, which was problematic for the reputations of the young women in question since both are symbols of prostitution in Mauritius.

Watching one another’s affairs [*vey zafer dimunn*] and spreading gossip [*koz palab*] are generally considered part of a ‘Creole mentality’ [*mantalite Kreol*]<sup>18</sup> that has become worse [*anpire*] in England, the land of twitching lace curtains. Related to spying and gossip is jealousy [*zaluzi*] and the concept of *gran nwar*, which refers to people thinking too highly of themselves and getting ideas above their station (see Ledikasyon Pu Travayer 1993: 91). People might be viewed as *gran nwar* if, when their purchasing power increases, they become conspicuous consumers of goods that would have been beyond their budget in Mauritius. For instance, many people remarked that Chagossians in Mauritius exchanged second-hand children’s clothes because new clothes were so expensive, but that migrants in the UK no longer accept offers of second-hand children’s clothes because they prefer to demonstrate that they can now afford new clothes.

Countless Chagossians told me that if a Chagossian worker obtains a good supervisory job, or a Chagossian pupil gets good grades at school, other Chagossians would not support



their fellow Chagossian or be proud [*fyer*] of the achievements and improved fortunes of the community (especially given the low levels of education and career development amongst the older generations). Rather, they would be jealous [*zalu*] and accuse the worker or pupil of being *gran nwar*, with the effect of depressing ambition. As evidence, several people claimed that ‘all Chagossians in Crawley are cleaners’, whereas, they claimed, Indo-Mauritian migrants in London are more likely to be students or nurses. Because of a fear of spying, gossip, jealousy, and criticism, Chagossian migrants often claimed (for the most part fairly inaccurately) that they no longer spoke to or met with other Chagossian migrants. According to Aline, a young woman of Chagossian parentage, in her late twenties, and employed in a care home,

The Mauritian mentality is in a bad state of affairs [*dan bez*]: jealousy, always spying on one another. They’ll never be able to live like Europeans because of this troublesome mentality [*mantalite bez*]. That’s why I prefer to associate with strangers than with family [*pli kontan frekante ek etranze ki fami*].

Such criticisms, however, were confronted by admonitions that ‘other’ Chagossians in Crawley were forgetting their Chagossian roots and that people who had been friendly in Mauritius or Seychelles had broken all ties and even started ignoring one another in the street or on buses since moving to Crawley. For most Chagossians in the UK – even those who criticised ‘the community’ for its alleged tendencies towards spying, gossip, and jealousy – most social interaction was with other Chagossian migrants, although opportunities for socialising are limited by long, irregular, or anti-social working hours.<sup>19</sup>

#### Community in Mauritius versus isolation in Crawley

A concern with leisure time reveals how much ideas about obtaining UK citizenship and migration to the UK are connected to stage in the life course. Most older Chagos-born islanders and Chagossian socio-political community leaders assert their desire to resettle Chagos. They see the right to return (plus the infrastructural assistance to do so) as the most appropriate recompense for islanders who experienced the displacement first-hand and who

wish to return to their homeland. They see financial compensation as something that would benefit displaced islanders and their descendants alike. UK citizenship, by contrast, is seen as recompense directed primarily towards the younger generations, because older people are considered less likely to uproot themselves from Mauritius or Seychelles and make a new start in the UK, where they would anticipate more trouble finding employment than would their younger and better educated offspring.

Most of those who migrated from Mauritius and Seychelles to the UK have been from the younger generations – people born in exile to Chagossian parent/s – particularly young adults with dependent children. Many Chagossians in Crawley worry about the effect of their exodus on their elders left behind in Mauritius or Seychelles, but do not view the UK as ideal for elderly people. Luke's wife Lydia said many older islanders in Mauritius (including her own mother Marceline) complain that they have been abandoned and forgotten by their offspring in the UK. She said older islanders tend to think that all of their problems (such as poverty and ill-health) are due to living in Mauritius, and imagine that moving to the UK would solve these problems – but, she said, they are mistaken. To start with, she predicted that her mother would find it difficult to adapt to the cold British weather and to having to climb the stairs in two-storey houses. Moreover, in Mauritius her mother lived with a son and was surrounded by grandchildren and neighbours who knew her and looked out for her. In Crawley, by contrast, the whole family is out all day, and cannot rely on neighbours to take care of the elderly like in Mauritius. Lydia told me:

People are more impoverished here than in Mauritius. Not in terms of food – they get plenty of food here – but in terms of interaction, communication, living together... People should find out about all these problems before they come, but the leaders made us believe that England is paradise.

Despite Lydia's apprehensions, her mother eventually moved to the family home in Crawley. When I visited Marceline a few months after her arrival, she said she agreed with Lydia that there were fewer activities for older people in the UK, where people are confined

indoors because of the weather, than in Mauritius, where much social life takes place outside. Like my other retired informants, Marceline felt that older people had fewer opportunities to meet others and were therefore more isolated in the UK than in Mauritius. Whilst in Mauritius, life in Mauritius was represented as individualistic and lacking in solidarity compared to life on Chagos, but from the vantage point of Crawley, life in Mauritius appears positively neighbourly when compared to life in the UK.<sup>20</sup> As one young woman put it, ‘in Mauritius we knew our neighbours, but here we don’t know them. Nobody has the time to talk, they’re not even interested, and they’re racist’.

On the other hand, Marceline was pleased to have seen a doctor who was seemingly the first to provide some relief from a previously misdiagnosed kidney problem. Other older Chagossian migrants similarly report positive experiences of financial assistance and healthcare in the UK. Charlesia Alexis is a Chagossian woman in her late seventies who migrated to Crawley in 2004 and was awarded a range of state benefits which enabled her to send money to Mauritius to pay for the passage of family members to the UK in 2006.<sup>21</sup> In Mauritius, Charlesia had long been a key player in the Chagossian struggle for the right to return, but when I asked her if she was upset at not being included in the Chagos visit in 2006, she shrugged and replied that she was no longer concerned with the Chagossian struggle. As an elderly woman in poor physical health, she found that she received adequate benefits in the UK and regularly saw a GP for her chronic diabetes and resultant mobility problems, which had eased the financial and healthcare problems she faced in Mauritius.<sup>22</sup> For her, the benefits of living in the UK overrode her prior commitment to the resettlement of the Chagos Archipelago. Thus these elderly migrants’ experiences complicate the assumption – held by many Chagossians still in Mauritius and Seychelles – that migrating to the UK is automatically of most interest to the younger generations.

#### Changing visions of the future

In Mauritius, Chagossians reported almost uniformly negative experiences of Mauritius, especially when compared with Chagos. How then have Chagossian critiques of Mauritius been affected by onward migration to the UK? First of all, certain ethno-political criticisms of Mauritius have remained strong. Newly arrived Chagossians in Crawley and those returning from visits to Mauritius frequently recounted stories of the speedy inflation and the rising levels of unemployment, drug abuse, and violent crime back in Mauritius, which they blamed on the policies of the Mauritian government. During an interview, a retired Chagossian couple, Lucette and Christophe, put it as follows:

Lucette: It was the Mauritian government that made us poor, and it's getting even worse, young people have no work, it's inflamed [*dan dife*].

Christophe: There's a political problem over there: black skin always comes last, we have no backing from the government, there's terrible discrimination and dirty politics. Insignificant people [*ti-dimunn*] suffer because of this...

Lucette: Over there it's like slavery: you work day and night for very little cash... There are lots of problems in Mauritius, tourists live it up but those who actually live there have lots of problems. They never make a budget that helps the insignificant people [*ti-dimunn*]. They should reduce what those at the top have and give it to those who are small. People tell us all the young people are turning to drugs. Why? There's no work, or if a mother works there's nobody to look after her children. If you work, you work a lot, but you don't get much pay.

Christophe: The problem is that there are too many ethnicities [*nasyon*].

Lucette: There's no co-operation, so the government does whatever it wants, it's domineering [*dominer*]. The people have no say.

Thus they recounted mounting problems caused by ethnic communalism and an economic system that benefits those at the top (particularly Indo-Mauritians, Franco-Mauritians, and Sino-Mauritians) and further disadvantages those at the bottom (particularly Chagossians and other Afro-Mauritians). How do such negative images of Mauritius affect plans for the future? My research in Mauritius initially indicated that Chagossian visions of the future were delineated primarily by generation: older displaced islanders asserted their desire to resettle the Chagos Archipelago, whilst their offspring variously imagined migrating to Europe, remaining in Mauritius, or participating in a future resettlement of Chagos. How has onward migration to Crawley affected Chagossian migrants' plans for the future?

By and large, Chagossians are embittered by their experiences of forced displacement, marginalisation, and ethnic discrimination in Mauritius, so it seemed plausible that Chagossians migrants in the UK would be unlikely to state a desire to return to Mauritius. This predication was correct for a few of my informants. Madeleine had worked as a cleaner in Mauritius before migrating to Crawley, where she got work as a cleaner at Gatwick. During my fieldwork, she lived with her dependent offspring in a house half paid for by the Council via Housing Benefit. She was unequivocal about her positive experience in the UK and her intention to remain in the UK for the foreseeable future:

When I came I knew I wouldn't have a problem with staying here because I already had family here. Before I got work I felt discouraged, but as soon as I got a job I knew I would be able to stay and bring my children. I worked for seven months, and after seven months I was able to bring the children here. Fortunately I managed to do that. With my job in Mauritius I wasn't able to buy enough food, but here I can get everything I want that I couldn't get in Mauritius. Everything's possible here. My life in Mauritius was very, very hard. Here it's just houses that are expensive. If people say they can't stay here, that means they don't want to stay here. Here, if you work, you can eat and drink, you can get everything you need, and you can stay. In Mauritius, you have to wait a week before you can afford meat. Unfortunately there are people who have come here who don't want to work, they just want to hang out, and they forget their families, but they should build a future here. People must be able to bring their families here because the currency is worth more in Mauritius. If they don't do it, that means they don't want to do it. In Mauritius there are lots of drug addicts, crime, rape, and rising costs. Everything has become difficult in Mauritius, which encourages me to stay here. I'm not saying I'll never return to live in Mauritius, because I don't know, but I'm not going for the moment, I'm doing well here.

By contrast, however, a surprisingly large number of my informants (native Chagos islanders and their descendants from a full range of stages in the life cycle) told me that they planned to retire to Mauritius. The majority of parents told me they had come to the UK for the benefit of their children's education and employment prospects, and many claimed (at least initially) that they intended eventually to retire to and resettle permanently in Mauritius. Serge, who brought his family to the UK so that his children could get a better education, said he planned to retire to Mauritius or Chagos once his children have finished school.

LJ: What visions do you have for the future?

Serge: I don't want to die here. I want to die either in my country [i.e. Chagos] or in Mauritius. I have lots of ideas but I don't know if I'll succeed because of the age I've reached. My goal is to buy a house here, help my children, and get decent work, but I don't know if I'll manage it because of my age. I have no intention of spending the rest of my life as a cleaner in the airport.

LJ: What about your children's futures?

Serge: None of them intends to return to Mauritius for the moment, and I think they're right because they're still young. They've only just come here for their education. They have their own visions.

Whilst Serge was generally positive about his experiences in Crawley (see excerpt above), here he reiterates several times that he did not wish to spend the rest of his life in or to die in the UK, and instead wanted eventually to return, preferably to Chagos, or otherwise to Mauritius.<sup>23</sup> For his children, Serge imagined, the choice would be between remaining in the UK and returning to Mauritius. Indeed, neither he nor his children considered that future resettlement of Chagos would be viable for them. This reflects the concern of many older Chagos islanders in Mauritius that onward migration to the UK would displace Chagos from the minds of migrants from the younger generations (and, as we have seen, even from the minds of some older native Chagos islanders). For those in Crawley, decisions about the future increasingly centre on the choice between remaining in the UK and returning to Mauritius. The general assessment is that the UK offers better opportunities for education, employment, and healthcare for young people but that Mauritius offers more attractive prospects for a retirement filled with social activities by the beach.

Will this have any long-term implications for the Chagossian struggle based in Mauritius, which focuses on pursuing the right to return to the Chagos Archipelago? Perhaps not, since the recent feasibility study drawn up in conversation with Chagossians in Mauritius (Howell 2008) concludes that the delicate, remote and tiny Chagos Archipelago could sustain only a small initial settlement and could not accommodate the vast majority of those who say they wish to return. In the case of small-scale resettlement, the challenge will be how to involve the increasingly geographically dispersed Chagossian community.

## **Migration and comparison**

The Chagossian case is instructive because it provides an example of forced displacement followed by onward migration within the living memory of the Chagossian community. Onward migration offers an intriguing opportunity to re-examine ideas about home, return, and the future among displaced people and migrants (cf. Al-Rasheed 1994; Gardner 2002; Jansen 2007; Kunz 1981; Watson 1977). Analyses of the ‘myth of return’ rightly recognise that the presence or absence and strength or weakness of a desire to return ‘home’ varies according to refugees’ or migrants’ past and present political and socio-economic positioning in relation to their ‘home’ and ‘host’ countries (e.g. Al-Rasheed 1994: 217). This may not, however, tell the whole story, especially when the notion of a clear ‘home’ and ‘host’ country are complicated because there are three rather than two locations.

In Mauritius, the widespread desire to return to Chagos can be explained by the Chagossians’ overwhelmingly negative experiences of forced displacement and the comparison they drew between the good life in Chagos and their poor circumstances in Mauritius. As a result of negative experiences in exile, hundreds of Chagossians have migrated to the UK. Most have been from the younger generations, who did not experience the forced displacement from Chagos first-hand, but emigrated from Mauritius seeking better education and employment prospects. By and large they continue to view Mauritius negatively, and they make much more varied (although generally less negative) assessments of life in the UK. It was therefore striking that so many nevertheless claimed that they wished one day to return to Mauritius.<sup>24</sup>

My conclusion is that this can only be explained by seeking to understand how experiences in the UK have challenged preconceptions about the UK, brought about subtle reformulations of conceptions of Mauritius (from ‘host’ to ‘home’), and altered the focus of visions of the future. From the vantage point of Mauritius, life in Mauritius was depicted as

uniformly inferior to life in Chagos. From the vantage point of Crawley, life in Mauritius is depicted as having certain benefits and drawbacks relative to life in the UK. In particular, the UK is generally seen as preferable to Mauritius in terms of *standard* of life and employment opportunities for young people, while Mauritius is generally seen as preferable in terms of *quality* of life, particularly for retired people.<sup>25</sup> Among the younger generations at least, this reassessment of Mauritius has been accompanied by a concomitant reconfiguration of Chagos as ancestral homeland rather than viable future. The Chagossian case, then, reveals ethnographically how migrants' perspectives on the past and the future alike are relative to their positioning in the present.

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## Notes

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<sup>1</sup> Third and subsequent generations total several thousand more.

<sup>2</sup> Comoros, Maldives, Mauritius, and Seychelles.

<sup>3</sup> Réunion has a similar history of immigration but remains a French overseas department.

<sup>4</sup> The BOT Act 2002 awarded UK citizenship to all citizens of UK Overseas Territories (formerly British Dependent Territories). Initially Chagossians would not have been eligible since they were resident in the independent states of Mauritius or Seychelles rather than in a UKOT (i.e. Chagos), but they were specifically included after a campaign that emphasised that their residence outwith Chagos was as a result of their forcible displacement from that territory rather than choice.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Parminder Bhachu's characterisation of Ugandan Asians in Britain as 'twice migrants' (Bhachu 1985).

<sup>6</sup> I conducted ethnographic fieldwork with Chagossians in Mauritius (2002-2004) and in Crawley (2006-2007).

<sup>7</sup> These percentages are approximations because the census stopped collecting data on ethnicity in 1983 but continued to collect data on religion (see Eriksen 1998: 15; Dinan n.d.: 81).

<sup>8</sup> Informants identified by first name only are pseudonyms. Translations from interviews conducted in Mauritian Kreol are mine.

<sup>9</sup> Mauritius Central Statistics Office website: [www.gov.mu/portal/site/cso](http://www.gov.mu/portal/site/cso)

<sup>10</sup> Smaller numbers of Chagossians from Mauritius and Seychelles live in London, Manchester, and elsewhere.

<sup>11</sup> Crawley demographic statistics: [www.crawley.gov.uk/stellent/groups/public/documents/report/int010668.pdf](http://www.crawley.gov.uk/stellent/groups/public/documents/report/int010668.pdf)

<sup>12</sup> UK Office for National Statistics online service: [www.statistics.gov.uk](http://www.statistics.gov.uk)

<sup>13</sup> For the minority of Chagossians who came from Mauritius with experience in IT, cabinet-making, nursery-nursing, dressmaking, secretarial work, or policing, their first jobs in the UK entailed an initial loss of status.

<sup>14</sup> Claims about solidarity and sharing on Chagos are matched by identical claims among non-Chagossian Mauritians about solidarity and sharing (particularly at times of bereavement) in Mauritius in the past too, and a concomitant complaint about the diminution of such values and practices in Mauritius. What is significant about the Chagossians' claim is that it adds a physical dimension to the familiar (temporal) romanticisation of 'the good old days' by linking loss of solidarity specifically to forced relocation to an inhospitable place.

<sup>15</sup> See: [www.westsussex.gov.uk/ccm/content/your-council/news-room/press-releases/2007/2007-05/chagossians-court-of-appeal-victory-welcomed-by-county-council.en?sessionId=a1Xu2xcypRmd](http://www.westsussex.gov.uk/ccm/content/your-council/news-room/press-releases/2007/2007-05/chagossians-court-of-appeal-victory-welcomed-by-county-council.en?sessionId=a1Xu2xcypRmd)

<sup>16</sup> Discourses on slavery are also central to recollections of Chagos because the population of Chagos came about as a result of slavery under colonialism. Conditions on Chagos in the mid-twentieth century (over a hundred years after the abolition of slavery) are remembered as a kind of protective paternalistic slavery.

<sup>17</sup> For case studies that elucidate the historical and geographical range of South Asian migration to the UK, see e.g. Anwar 1979; Baumann 1996; Bhachu 1985; Gardner 2002; Watson 1977.

<sup>18</sup> Anthropological typologies of ethnic stereotyping in Mauritius report stereotypes of Creoles as 'lazy, merry, careless' (Eriksen 1998: 54; cf. Boswell 2006: 59-61).

<sup>19</sup> For a similar account of Zimbabwean cleaners in the UK, see McGregor 2007: 817.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Peteet 2005: 129.

<sup>21</sup> Space precludes further discussion of remittances.

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Gardner 2002.

<sup>23</sup> Serge's preoccupation with where to live out the end of his life recalls Stef Jansen's remark, in relation to displaced Bosnians, that 'elderly persons were dying to return and returning to die' (Jansen 2007: 24).

<sup>24</sup> It is important to note that as the years go by, even some of those Chagossians who say they wish to retire to Mauritius also recognise that this dream is becoming increasingly unlikely as they and their families settle in the UK. I have sought to explore the commonly stated desire to return to Mauritius and/or Chagos not as a definitive programme for action but as a response to disappointments such as long working hours, educational setbacks, experiences of exclusion, racism, or isolation (cf. Anwar 1979).

<sup>25</sup> This resonates with Philip Mar's distinction between 'the good life' based variably on 'economic possibility' or on 'social possibility' (in Mar 2005: 372).

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